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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 001250

SIPDIS

STATE FOR INR/B, NEA/ARPI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/08/2015

TAGS: [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: BIO: SHARIFA BINT KHALFAN AL-YAHYAI, MINISTER OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

REF: A. STATE 137596

[B](#). 04 MUSCAT 1899

[C](#). 03 MUSCAT 2515

Classified By: Ambassador Richard L. Baltimore III.
Reason: 1.4 (b, d).

[1](#). (C) The requested information on Oman's female Minister of Social Development is provided below, keyed to ref A para 3 format. Much of this information was provided previously in ref B.

[2](#). (U) Dr. Sharifa bint Khalfan bin Nasser al-Yahyai, Minister of Social Development (since October 20, 2004). (Note: For ease of reference, this embassy uses the masculine form of surnames despite the fact that Omani sources will sometimes put a feminine ending on the surnames of female officials. For this reason, Dr. Sharifa's surname sometimes appears in publications as "al-Yahya'eeya" or some derivation thereof. End note.)

[A](#). (U) Born: October 14, 1969; Muscat, Oman.

[B](#). (SBU) Personal and Career Data

-- She is married to Dr. Abdullah bin Khamis bin Jumaa al-Kindi, Deputy Dean of Student Affairs at Sultan Qaboos University, specializing in the Media and Journalism Department. Dr. Sharifa has a son, Azzan (born in 2001), and a daughter, Shiam (born in 2002).

-- Dr. Sharifa's older brother, Mohammed, is a journalist and political activist in self-imposed political exile in the U.S. His political troubles began in earnest in 2003 after he announced the launch of the Gulf Press Freedom Organization, intended to advance the cause of free speech and journalistic professionalism in the Arabian Gulf region. He announced the organization while participating in a National Democratic Institute-sponsored forum in Yemen. Mohammed is currently working for the USG-funded Al-Hurra satellite television channel in Washington. Mohammed's wife (Dr. Sharifa's sister-in-law) is another noted Omani journalist, Rafia al-Talaei. Rafia is editor of Al-Maraa (Woman) magazine, which published a revealing interview with Dr. Sharifa soon after her appointment.

-- Dr. Sharifa was raised in the Wilayat (district) of Barka, in the Muscat Governorate. When she entered Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) as an undergraduate in 1988, she intended to specialize in English language and literature, but was so exasperated with the teaching styles in that department that she switched in her second year to the Department of Arabic Language. Even as a freshman, however, she claimed in an interview to have been inspired to become an Assistant Professor, which was her goal. She attained her Masters degree from SQU and began teaching Arabic there for a brief period before enrolling in the Ph.D. program at the University of Leeds (UK) Department of Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies, from which she graduated in 2001. She then returned to SQU as an Assistant Professor in Arabic literature. Admitting that her academic career kept her "to some extent detached from society and its problems," she is fond of research. She edited a book with a colleague entitled "Studies in the Literature of Oman and the Gulf," and was 17 pages into a new study (in English) on "The Image of Omani Women in the Arabic Novel" when she was appointed minister. She has published some literary articles in the Omani press, and in early 2004 was selected among SQU faculty to accompany 32 female students on a study tour to Malaysia and Singapore that is funded annually by the Sultan.

[C](#). (SBU) Religious Sect

-- Dr. Sharifa is an Ibadhi Muslim.

[D](#). (C) Relation to, Influence with Country Leaders

-- Dr. Sharifa's father's close relationship with the influential Minister of the Diwan of the Royal Court, Sayyid Ali bin Humud al-Busaidi (also from Barka), is widely cited as playing a role in the appointment of an otherwise obscure Arabic literature professor as Minister of Social Development. Sayyid Ali intervened at least twice before on

behalf of her family, specifically in the case of her brother Mohammed. Sayyid Ali was the one who ensured that Mohammed got a coveted government scholarship to pursue his Masters degree at the University of Leicester, and was also the one who warned Mohammed that he stood to be arrested for his advocacy of the Gulf Press Freedom Organization (ref C).

-- Apart from the family connection to Sayyid Ali, Dr. Sharifa is not believed to exercise a great deal of influence with top officials. Her ministry has long suffered from neglect under her poorly regarded and absentee predecessor, Shaykh Amir bin Shuwain al-Hosni, and by all accounts she has faced considerable resistance from her ministry staff in making personnel changes. As the junior-most cabinet member in terms of both age and tenure, and given her humble resume, it will likely take some time for the minister to build influence and stature with other national leaders.

1E. (C) Reason for Appointment

-- The removal of Dr. Sharifa's predecessor had been long expected when it finally came about in October 2004. The anticipated successor, however, was the then-Under Secretary of the Ministry, Dr. Thuwaiba al-Barwani, who was instead transferred to the State Council (the appointive house of parliament). While many people expected the post to go to a female (the Sultan was determined to increase the number of women in the cabinet, and this ministry is the one most directly responsible for women's affairs), Dr. Sharifa was not included on anyone's "short-list" of potential candidates, nor did she expect the appointment herself. She has a good reputation for hard work and intelligence.

1F. (C) Views on the Sultan, His Policies, and on the U.S.

-- Dr. Sharifa has expressed praise and appreciation for the Sultan's leadership and efforts at promoting opportunities for women. She has made at least two trips in 2005, including to represent the Omani government at the June launching of the Smithsonian Institution's Folklife Festival on the Washington Mall (in which Oman was the featured foreign country). She took the opportunity of her visit to Washington to meet with State Department officials on Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)-related issues and to visit some non-governmental organizations. Dr. Sharifa relies considerably on at least one special adviser in her ministry who has excellent relations with the U.S. and UK Embassies. Dr. Sharifa has met several times with American personnel, and is promoting a proposal to place an American NGO expert on her staff as a special adviser.

1G. (C) Grooming for Ministerial Position

-- There is no indication that Dr. Sharifa received any grooming for this position.

1H. (C) Her Views on Timing of Her Appointment

-- As noted above, a change in personnel at the helm of the Ministry of Social Development was long-anticipated by late 2004. Why she was the person appointed, however, is still not clear.

1I. (C) Goals and Aspirations, Reform-Mindedness

-- The minister has publicly stated that her future priorities include "reinforcing social development and intellectual awareness among members of society through the activities and programs" of her ministry, and studying a "national strategy to develop Omani women." Western diplomats opine that she may feel a need to improve the delivery of basic services in order to create the political space to embark on more reformist agendas.

-- Further evidence that she is open to reform is the fact that the Foreign Ministry has informally approached us with requests that we help cultivate the young minister as someone capable of instituting change.

1J. (C) Meetings with U.S. Officials

-- The Minister has been open and frank in meetings with Embassy officers, be it with the Ambassador or with our part-time democracy coordinator. She does not stand on protocol, but observes proper etiquette and dresses in conservative fashion. She readily acknowledges the challenges confronting her, both given her limited background and the difficult work of her ministry.

1K. (C) Religious Conservatives

-- Given the religious diversity in Oman, conservative attitudes toward women in high office are more of a social rather than religious phenomenon. There is no widespread perception that conservative elements pose a physical threat, making it unlikely that the minister is concerned with such

fears.
BALTIMORE